

# Love sickness and the healing of Rumi

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Being in love is manifested by the grief of the heart  
there is no sickness like the sickness of the heart.

The disease of the lover is other than all other diseases  
love is the astrolabe of God's mysteries.

Whether being in love be from here below or the side,  
in the end it is our guide to the side yonder.<sup>1</sup>

The last century saw war and death on an unprecedented scale and the early signs from our present century are that this pattern of self-inflicted human carnage will accelerate.<sup>2–4</sup> Underlying the stark headline figures of fatalities—whether the three and a half thousand in the United States, the tens of thousands in Afghanistan, or the hundred thousand or more in Iraq—are just far too many stories of unnecessary pain, grief and loss.<sup>5–8</sup>

Dear reader in 2055, crystal-ball gazing is a foolhardy pursuit. Today, there are countless local and regional projects afoot, both in the UK and elsewhere, aiming to promote mutual understanding and respect, and complementing these are a smattering of key political initiatives on the international stage.<sup>9</sup> But the one thing, perhaps above all else, that offers me hope for the world fifty years hence is the increasing and now global interest in the life and works of Rumi.<sup>10</sup> For such is the stature of the man, and the universality of his message, that he can I believe, even today, serve as the elusive bridge between the Orient and Occident.<sup>11</sup> In death, just as in life, he continues to remind us that we can and must find other ways:

Go not to the quarter of despair; there is hope  
go not towards darkness; there are suns.<sup>12</sup>

## 'Our Master from Rome'

Born in the Eastern part of the Ancient Persian Empire near present-day Afghanistan, he was named Jalal-ud-din meaning 'The Majesty of Religion'. But even such a name failed to do justice to this child prodigy, and his father, himself a

distinguished scholar of religion, conferred on him the title *Maulana*.

It was whilst wandering through a Turkish book bazaar some years ago that I began to appreciate the affection with which Rumi continues to be held among the peoples of the East. 'Do you have any of Rumi's works in English?' I inquired. 'Mevlana Rumi?' came the hurt bookseller's whispered response, gently pointing out that I had perhaps unintentionally neglected to use the proper title. And although this is a generic term of respect, such is the veneration in which Rumi is held that if used alone *Maulana* (*Mevlana* in Turkish), meaning 'Our Master', is throughout much of the Muslim world a synonym for this supreme troubadour. After almost a decade of regularly turning to *Maulana's* teachings in search of light, I understand why he is held in such veneration.<sup>13</sup>

The threat of the Mongol invasion in Persia led the young Jalal-ud-din's family westwards, eventually to settle in Anatolia (present-day Konya in the southern part of modern-day Turkey). Because of the Byzantine past of the region it retained the name *Rum* ('Rome') among the Anatolians, and it was from this historical connection that Jalal-ud-din assumed the toponym Rumi, 'The Man of Rome'.<sup>14</sup>

## Burning in the light of the sun

It was at the feet of his father, Baha-al-din, that the young Rumi acquired an appreciation and love for the works of the celebrated medieval theologian and ascetic Abu-Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111). Their two lives offer many parallels, not least in the way that both, at the height of their careers in religious law, were to throw off the shackles of academic and jurisprudential deliberations to pursue the religion of the heart.<sup>15</sup> The impressionable young man, as history records, was also introduced by his father to some of the leading spiritual lights of his age including most notably Farid ud-din Attar (d.~1220), author of the deeply memorable poem *The Conference of the Birds*;<sup>16</sup> these influences doubtless laid the foundations for his later transformation.

But for a meeting with Shams of Tabriz (d.1247) it is unlikely that Rumi's name would ever have found its way on to the pages of history.<sup>17</sup> For it was this meeting that, caused him to turn from the life of a scholar/preacher and become 'the greatest mystical poet of any age'.<sup>18</sup>

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Throughout history there have always been spiritual poles that form the axes around which our world rotates. Shams must have been one such pole. It is clear from the accounts of his life, however fragmentary, that he had no care for the world of form, but rather was in a perpetual quest for that *sophia perennis* that underpins our universe.<sup>11,17</sup> In their encounter, it was as if these two travellers on a desert path reached an oasis from where they could both draw the sustenance needed for the long and difficult journey onwards.<sup>19</sup> Each found in his fellow's company a way to open the heart in a manner previously impossible. Shams (meaning 'Sun') exerted the most extraordinary alchemy on Rumi, the man of letters, and vivified the growth of his latent spiritual and literary genius. Like an experienced physician, Shams was able to identify the ailment from which Rumi suffered—an ailment that, were he to appear today, he might recognize in many of us—but of which he had hitherto been blissfully unaware, and from there guide him onto the wholeness his inner being so craved:

The intellectual quest, though fine as pearl or coral,  
is not the spiritual search.

The spiritual search is on another level;  
spiritual wine is another substance!<sup>20</sup>

The spiritual path wrecks the body  
and afterwards restores it to health.

It destroys the house to unearth the treasure  
and with that treasure builds it better than before.<sup>21</sup>

### Love is the ailment...

Love is the transformative force that infuses every aspect of Rumi's world and herein lies his appeal and the timelessness of his message: there is an inherent unity in our universe, and love is the key to realizing it.<sup>13,22,23</sup> It is for this reason that we have the capacity to love and moreover the need to be loved.

It is this primordial cry, inherent in each of us and acutely perceived by Rumi, that forms the subject matter of the *Mathnawi*, a vast six-volume work consisting of lyrical poetry and parables.<sup>24</sup> This, the external manifestation of his encounter with Shams, stands as the treasure of the Persian-speaking world and is memorized, in part at least, by every literate member of Persian society. 'The Koran in Persian', as it is known, is an account of the pangs of separation, opening with the cry of the reed as it is pulled from its bed:

Listen to the reed (flute), how it is complaining!  
It is telling about separations (saying),

"Ever since I was severed from the reed field, men and women have lamented in (the presence of) my shrill cries. (But) I want a heart (which is) torn, torn from separation, so that I may explain the pain of yearning."

Anyone who has remained far from his roots,  
seeks a return (to the) time of his union."<sup>25</sup>

This pain of separation is manifest at birth as the cry with which an infant enters the divine amphitheatre. Although audible to all, alas few understand. From this moment onwards, the soul's one quest is to re-experience something of that primordial sense of bliss. But engulfed by our passion, we are so often drawn to the world of transience rather than the world of permanence. The forms and manifestations of this poisoned love are many, as the reed opines:

'I lamented in every gathering;  
I associated with those in bad or happy circumstances.  
(But) everyone became my friend from his (own) opinion;  
he did not seek my secrets from within me.  
My secret is not far from my lament,  
but eyes and ears do not have the light (to sense it).'<sup>26</sup>

The love for the ephemeral, whether for a woman or man, for possessions, position, power or legacy, is all ultimately illusory:

How long will you say,  
'I will conquer the entire world and fill it with myself?'  
Even if snow covered the world completely,  
the sun could melt it with a glance.<sup>27</sup>

### And in love is the healing

The details surrounding Shams' appearance in Konya are hazy, but the anguished poetic outpourings that his sudden disappearances were to cause Rumi are now known the world over. For it is this poetry, much of it dedicated in memory to Shams, that is now to be found in bookshops from East to West, on calendars and on the Worldwide Web (in abundance), and is moreover being recited in all manner of places of worship, both orthodox and New Age. More bizarrely, perhaps, 'Rumi-mania', as Lewis notes in the introduction to his scholarly work, has increasingly penetrated popular culture such that his lyrics can now be found in pop songs, opera and theatre; for the past decade, indeed, he has been the best-selling poet in the USA.<sup>11</sup>

The departure of Shams caused Rumi to realize that his attention, affection and love (which was not homoerotic as some writers have supposed) were all more appropriately directed elsewhere. First burned and then consumed by the



Figure 1 The Sema of the whirling dervish

power of love, he, through overcoming the lower self, witnessed an unveiling that allowed him to drink directly from the Spring of Knowledge,<sup>28</sup> something of the taste of which we too can still savour:

The reed's cry is fire—it's not wind!  
Whoever doesn't have this figure, may he be nothing!  
It is the fire of Love that fell into the reed  
it is the ferment of Love that fell into the wine.  
The reed (is) the companion of anyone who was severed  
from a friend; its melodies tore our veils.<sup>29</sup>

And if the poetry in which many of us today find succour was the external manifestation of the healing that Shams worked, the Sema of the whirling dervish remains the more potent inward manifestation of that encounter.<sup>30</sup> For as Rumi himself acknowledged, even he, one whose words he prophesied 'will be told among the lovers, centuries after my death', was unable to find the language to do justice to the subject of his preoccupation:

Whatever description or explanation I give of love,  
when I reach love I am ashamed of my exposition.  
Although commentary by the tongue clarifies,  
love that is tongueless is of greater clarity.  
As the pen was hastening to write  
when it came to love it split asunder.<sup>31</sup>

After removal of the long black cloak of death, the seeker's white inner garment, representing the burnished soul, is exposed. Silently dancing, one foot pinned to the ground representing the necessity for a firm anchor in authentic religion, whilst the other leg, twirling, symbolizes

interaction with and responsibility to all else, irrespective of place, time, colour, language or creed, with whom we share the divine breath. Right arm outstretched, palm upwards, receiving from the Creator; left arm lowered palm facing downwards, delivering to the created world.

This majestic dance is the twirling of all those who revel in Divine Love. And today, he continues to invite us, as he has done for close on eight centuries now, to partake in the celestial rhapsody and through so doing be rendered whole again:

Whatever there is, is only He,  
your foot steps there in dancing:  
The whirling, see, belongs to you,  
and you belong to the whirling.  
What can I do when Love appears  
and puts its claws around my neck?  
I grasp it, take it to my breast  
and drag it into the whirling!  
And when the bosom of the motes  
is filled with the glow of the sun,  
They enter all the dance, the dance  
and do not complain in the whirling!<sup>32</sup>

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